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ABSTRACT

Christopher Newport College, begun as a colony of the College of William and Mary, was born in the 1960s out of the fervor to open the doors of higher education to more people. It enrolls between 500-600 students in freshman writing courses each semester. Changes to the freshman composition program were undertaken, beginning in 1994, with a shift in emphasis from a vaguely modes approach to writing across the curriculum, and a handpicked "compcrew" of six faculty members dedicated to change and a more pragmatic approach to assessment procedures. The new curriculum sequence, put in place in spring of 1996, began with the assumptions that all writing instructors must support a set of common goals, and students and instructors will be involved in the assessment process, which will involve a variety of assessment strategies with the primary purpose of improving classroom instruction. The six-step assessment program included: (1) diagnostic writing samples; (2) midterm assessments; (3) a common final; (4) readers' responses to the instructors; (5) instructors' responses to the common final and the course; and (6) a report containing the synthesized data from the first 5 steps is disseminated to external audiences and to the faculty. This assessment model designed by writing instructors creates a continuous dialogue that improves teaching and the program. (CR)

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Just Talking: A Conversational Model for Assessment

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Part I: The History

Christopher Newport College was born in the 60's out of the fervor to open the doors of higher education to more people. It began as a colony of the College of William and Mary in 1960; new, colonial ruling classes in Williamsburg and shipbuilders in Newport News, the bronze class of Plato's Republic. The differences are as marked as ever with CNU sometimes lovingly referred to as "Blue Collar U." Romantic class wars live on! Our catalogue will tell you, to put a positive spin on it, that Christopher Newport was the English Mariner "who was among the most important men connected with the permanent settling of Virginia. It was Captain Newport (the athletics teams' nickname is 'The Captains') who was put 'in sole charge and command' of the small squadron of three ships which made the historic voyage, culminating in the landing at Jamestown (wasn't Jamestown then) in 1607. Capt. Chris is reportedly one model for Captain Hook, who reportedly feuded violently with Captain John Smith and locked him in a ship's brig for most of the voyage to the "new world." Thus began the model for campus politics, I like to think. By 1977 CNU had cast off its colonial masters and become independent. Our student body is 2/3's female, largely from the Virginia Peninsula, and declining in average age from a little more than 27 some years ago to now less than 25. Four years ago CNU began offering several MAT courses and petitioned the legislature to change its name from College to University. The most vocal opponent of the change came from the former colonial masters who lost in a close fight in the legislature. We enroll about 500 to 600 students in freshman writing courses each semester, the department's most important FTE generator.

When my department chair approached me in the spring of 1994 about "taking over the freshman composition program," I asked,like our namesake to be put "in sole charge and command." Well, not exactly in those words.
After considerable reflection and reading Ed White and recalling Erika Lindemann and rekindling my love of Roger Garrison and Mina Shaughnessy

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and recalling my early days at CNU teaching four sections of what was then Basic Writing with an emphasis on preparing students to write across the curriculum, and remembering the Lily Conference on College Teaching at Miami of Ohio, I said yes -- for two years, with his support for a common final; a shift in emphasis from a vaguely modes approach to a writing across the curriculum emphasis; and a hand-picked compcrew dedicated to change and a more pragmatic approach to assessment procedures. Thus was good ship composition landed on historic shores -- but this time, all of us who worked together were committed to take more carefully into account the indigenous population -- our students, rather than the higher education bureaucrats in the Holy City of Richmond. We also agreed that while the goals of the new 101 - 102 sequence would be hashed out first, to become anchors, we would also try to create a curriculum that, as far as possible, was a "continuous revolution." My colleague Roark and now the new Captain Hook of freshman composition said that somehow this sounded like a strange harmonious combination of Mao Tse Tung and Thomas Jefferson.

We also decided that before the curriculum was put in place we would experiment in the spring of 1995 by having six faculty members teach "experimental" sections, visit each others' classes, write observations, meet formally and informally to chart and rechart our course, and try out some assessment procedures that would create the impetus for our conversational model of assessing teaching and learning. During that period one of my colleagues and I conducted some research using psychologist Martin Seligmann's model of learned optimism to see if our freshman writers performance in class and improvement or lack of improvement in learning was connected to student's habits of responses to success and failure. (We presented the paper last year at CCCCs and it is available through ERIC).

We tried out and found useful Angelo's model of quick assessment (Roark will expand a bit on that in the second part) and agreed to the common final and written self assessments of our teaching in response to one or two of our colleague's anonymous grading of our "advisory" finals, to count at least 10% of each student's final grade. Needless to say, this idea was the most unnerving for us, but it has come to be one of the most fruitful sources of conversation about our teaching and learning. Most faculty now use both the written comments from their assessor's reading of their exams and their reply as part of the department and university's annual evaluation procedures. In the late spring the curriculum for 101 was approved and applied department-wide in the Fall of 1995. In that same fall the

composition crew decided to drop the literature focus for English 102 and concentrate almost exclusively on teaching argument. We also pilot-tested a few of these courses (giving up teaching literature was, next to common finals, high on the anxiety producing scale), But after a few threats to have colleagues thrown in the brig for the rest of the voyage to a new curriculum, we had a new curriculum sequence in place by the end of the spring of 1996. (We also, coincidentally, decided to do away with so-called remedial, non-credit courses for freshman and instead to have a core of faculty agree to teach special placement sections that focused on closer support and guidance for students whose SAT Verbal scores indicated they may jump overboard before they were finished with freshman writing.)

Our course assumptions were : 1. Reading and writing well are reciprocal intellectual activities that can be taught; 2. Most freshman at CNU need guided practice in reading and writing nonfiction, academic prose, beginning with fundamental understandings, developing progressively to more complex intellectual tasks; 3. English classes at CNU need to prepare students for reading, writing, thinking, talking, and listening in the academic disciplines in the university's colleges; 4. English 101 and 102 will better serve students and act as a locus for improving teaching and learning if course sections share clear, common goals, common applied assessment measures, and a common final examination; 5. freshman writing classes should largely be devoted to student reading, writing, listening and speaking, not lecture. The sense of common purpose to improve and assess teaching and learning in the freshman writing sequence at CNU produced some not unpredictable but constructive results. The number of student complaints about the differences between instructors dropped to almost nothing. Students saw themselves together as sharing a common task and serious. student behavior improved. In student evaluations, while the overall GPA average went down in the courses, on standard university-wide evaluations, students consistently rated the 101-102 courses as more valuable than other general education courses. Adjunct instructors (about 40% or our courses are taught by adjuncts) found the curriculum easy to adjust to. They also took an active part in composition lunch discussions. We were surprised to find our department in the forefront of finding more effective ways to assess teaching by using the Angelo G.I.F.T. technique and the "expostulation and reply" reflections required by the common final. Students also began to realize there was some connection between the inter textual debates and public debates in the world outside their curriculum. (This spring, for example, our

study and reading in issues in biotechnology have hit home with Dolly, and monkeys, and frogs. One wag has suggested their fears have been increased that some of their writing teachers could be clones, a nightmarish vision beyond any imagined eugenic horror!) We continue to look at results, to tinker, but we have left behind the early model of assessment that was largely driven by external forces and given up reporting as protection. Captain Roark will now provide some of the details of our strategic conversations.

Part II: The Assessment Model

In 1993 at the Toronto MLA convention, Peter Elbow announced that assessment is here to stay and that we, as teachers, will be asked to be more and more accountable for our teaching. He argued that our task is not to avoid assessment but to develop formative assessment strategies, strategies that support our goals. In an essay titled "The Rhetorical Problem of Program Evaluation," Edward White begins with a similar premise, claiming that the public has a right to ask us to justify our practices and that we have a responsibility to answer their questions with evidence. White further asserts that writing teachers are particularly adept at assessment because we are rhetoricians; we know how to amass persuasive evidence.

At Christopher Newport University, we attempted to develop assessment procedures that would be formative and that would support our goals. While we recognized our responsibility to external audiences, our first goal was to develop an assessment model that would improve classroom instruction. We began with four assumptions:

- All writing instructors must support a set of common goals, goals that we developed collaboratively.
- All affected parties, students and instructors, will be involved in the assessment process.
- A variety of assessment strategies will be employed, not just one.
- All assessment strategies will have the primary purpose of improving classroom instruction.

With these goals in mind we developed a six-step assessment program:

Step 1--The Diagnostic Writing Sample:

The first step is a diagnostic writing sample. In all writing classes, during the first week of each semester, instructors administer a diagnostic writing test tied to the reading and writing emphasis in our course. The students have thirty minutes to read a short passage from their text and to write a critique. The instructors then analyze these written samples, employing them to identify strengths and weaknesses in the classes they teach. After the instructors utilize the samples, they are given to the Director of Freshman Writing. Besides sparking discussion among the writing faculty, they have revealed specific problems that could be addressed and solved early in the semester through focused instruction. For example, each semester the diagnostic test identifies ESL students who have mistakenly enrolled in English 101 before completing their ESL courses.

Step 2-- The Midterm Assessment:

The second element of the assessment program is the "Midterm Analysis of Teaching," based on T. A. Angelo's G. I. F. T. technique. At least once each semester, all writing teachers administer an informal, anonymous course evaluation. This evaluation asks the students three questions:

- "What does the instructor do that helps you learn?"
- "What does the instructor do that inhibits your learning?"
- "What might the instructor do to help you learn better?"

Each instructor discusses the results of this evaluation with the class, attempting to address the students' concerns. Then the instructor writes a brief report to the Director of Freshman Writing summarizing the results. The students' responses consistently emphasize three points:

- First, the students learn better if the instructor is organized and prepared, if the instructor gives clear goals and assignments.
- Second, the students learn more in active classrooms where they participate daily.
- Third, the students are motivated by instructors who meet with them individually and who write meaningful comments on their papers.

These responses might seem obvious, but they give us evidence to support our pedagogical approach and to convince instructors to create an active learning environment.

Step 3--The Common Final:

The third step is the keystone of our assessment program--the common advisory final. At the end of each semester, all students in freshman writing courses take a common final that is read collectively. This is a laborious, time-consuming process, a process that has sparked fiery debate, but the very fact the final inflames such discussions is one sign that it is working--it is forcing us to talk to each other about our goals and our expectations at the end of semester. While this advisory final counts as at least 10% of the student's grade, each individual instructor remains responsible for assigning final course grades.

To help us score the final, we developed, and refined several times,rubrics and score sheets that identify six writing traits, three content-related traits (summary, critique and personal response) and three formal traits (style, correctness, and structure). During the first two semesters, students received the lowest scores for their personal responses, which corroborated the instructors' complaints that students were not developing their ability to think critically, analytically, and independently. After adjusting our curriculum to encourage critical thought, the personal response scores increased, some indication that this assessment model works, that it does affect classroom teaching and learning.

Step 4--Reader's Response to the Instructor:

After grading a set of finals, each reader writes a brief report to the instructor identifying strengths and weaknesses. While instructors occasionally use this response to vent their frustrations or to advance a private agenda, the readers more often identify strengths and weakness that are exhibited by all students. As mentioned above, instructors often lamented the lack of critical thought and personal examples in the English 102 exams. Argument is the main focus of the course. These responses along with supporting results from the finals forced us to adjust the curriculum.

Step 5--Instructor's Responses to the Common Final and the Course:

After grading other's finals and after reviewing their own, each instructor writes a report that analyzes the quality of the class, the successes and failures of the teaching, and changes that the instructor will make, goals for teaching the course the next time. While some instructors use the response as a forum for complaining that the finals were not graded fairly or consistently, the number of disgruntled

responses has decreased each semester. Most instructors use the response to reflect on the semester and to plan future adjustments and pedagogical change. While most instructors still find this entire process painful in that it forces them to re-evaluate their teaching each semester, most agree that it is valuable and that they have improved their teaching from the results.

Step 6--Results and Consequences and Future Plans:

Finally, the Director of Writing synthesizes the data from the first five steps in a report that is disseminated not only to external audiences but that is returned to the faculty. The report is a catalyst for further adjustments to the program and the classroom, particularly in composition committee decision-making. The most profound result of the new curriculum is simple--it has caused writing teachers to talk to each other. The teachers are discussing grades, assignments, students, the final, and the curriculum. These discussions occur on a formal level when we grade each other's finals and when we attend brown-bag discussions, but these discussions go on in offices and hallways, and these discussions cause continuous change in our teaching.

Conclusion:

I began teaching at Christopher Newport University the year before Douglas started the new assessment program. When I arrived, there was a portfolio review process in place. At first I wondered anxiously what the process involved, what the results might reveal about me and my students. Dutifully, I collected my students' portfolios and stored them, waiting. My anxiety melted into disappointment when I discovered that a random sampling of the portfolios was used to defend the program but that this process would not impact me nor my instruction. As we began to develop the new assessment model, my anxiety returned. How would my students do on the final? How would this reflect on me? After the first semester, I, like others, wrote an instructor's report excoriating the inconsistency of those who read my students' finals. But what these readers had to say about my students' strengths and weaknesses slowly sank in--I took the information and used it to improve my instruction. Because this assessment model does impact our students and our classroom practices, it causes some anxiety and some defensive responses. But as I and the other instructors began to trust each other, we realized that our assessment procedures created a continuous dialogue that improved our teaching

and the program. While this new assessment model was designed by writing instructors to improve writing instruction, it has also satisfied those outside our department who now commend us for conducting meaningful assessment that insures high standards. In the past year, a local high school, the police department, and the University's director of assessment have used aspects of this assessment model to develop their own writing assessment procedure, which is further evidence that writing instructors can develop formative assessment procedures that satisfy outside audiences.